

**PHILOSOPHY AND CONCEPTS OF 'LIGHT' IN  
BAMBOO SHOOT MALAY SONGKET MOTIFS INTO  
CONTEMPORARY LIGHTING DESIGN**

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INTO CONTEMPORARY LIGHTING DESIGN**

**by**

**SAFIAL AQBAR BIN ZAKARIA**

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# **FALSAFAH DAN KONSEP ‘CAHAYA’ DALAM PUCUK REBUNG MOTIF SONGKET MELAYU KE DALAM REKA BENTUK LAMPU KONTEMPORARI**

## **ABSTRAK**

Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada makna mendalam dan falsafah cahaya daripada motif songket bersama dengan tradisi dan penyatuan sejarah. Songket Melayu mempunyai gaya serantau yang unik, yang mengandungi keaslian dan komposisi untuk pelbagai latar belakang budayanya, falsafah dan agama untuk membantu pada pembangunan proses kreatif di dalam reka bentuk lampu kontemporari. Melalui songket kajian ini meneliti ritual dan adat resam yang merangkumi falsafah dan makna cahaya dari tafsiran Melayu dan pemahaman dari segi budaya, kerohanian, sifat fizikal dan emosi. Objektif pertama adalah untuk menganalisis falsafah dan makna cahaya kepada orang Melayu, melalui kajian yang mendalam pada simbol-simbol dan motif songket. Kedua, kajian ini telah menginterpretasikan aplikasi cahaya tradisional Melayu dan pemahaman dalam konteks kontemporari. Dari dua objektif disebutkan di atas, objektif ketiga telah dikukuhkan di mana konsep reka bentuk lampu kontemporari boleh diuraikan berdasarkan kepada penemuan yang berkaitan dengan kepentingan teori diperolehi daripada motif songket dan transformasi ke dalam amalan reka bentuk lampu kontemporari. Hasil kajian ini adalah kualitatif. Metodologi kajian yang digunakan dalam kajian ini melibatkan pengumpulan data kualitatif. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan untuk mengesahkan dan menyokong dapatan dalam satu kajian tentang interpretasi cahaya dalam budaya Melayu dan untuk menjawab persoalan kajian. Ia disokong oleh temubual berstruktur, pemerhatian dan data visual daripada pelbagai latar belakang. Motif songket boleh dilihat sebagai 'cahaya' yang simbolik mewakili Pencipta, manusia, haiwan dan alam. Makna cahaya

dalam budaya Melayu telah difahami bukan sahaja dalam saintifik dan deria fizikal, tetapi difahami lebih mendalam dalam budaya. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa Melayu telah menterjemahkan penghargaan ini dari ciptaan indah Tuhan (Allah) ke dalam songket melalui deria penenun, yang kemudian menghantar mesej ini ke minda dan hati mereka. Kajian ini menunjukkan hubungannya dengan Melayu, yang mencipta budaya seni dan warisan, dengan menambah 'jiwa' ke dalam reka bentuk, mengambil aspek budaya, pegangan dan ketuhanan, semua yang membuka minda kita kepada kewujudan dan mengaitkannya dengan cahaya. Dengan meneliti falsafah seni Melayu, kajian ini menemui bahawa cahaya dan pencahayaan tidak boleh difahami hanya dalam deria normal sekadar reka bentuk atau entiti fizikal, tetapi ia perlu untuk dihargai dan menyatakan melalui emosi, minda dan fizikal. Perubahan yang berlaku kekal warisan, dipelihara dan dibangunkan, manakala mengguna pakai perubahan baru dan teknologi yang meningkatkan kreativiti dalam proses kreatif dalam reka bentuk lampu kontemporari.

# **PHILOSOPHY AND CONCEPTS OF ‘LIGHT’ IN BAMBOO SHOOT MALAY SONGKET MOTIFS INTO CONTEMPORARY LIGHTING DESIGN**

## **ABSTRACT**

This research focuses on the in-depth meaning and philosophy of light of the *songket* motifs together with traditions and historical associations. The Malay *songket* has a unique regional style, which owes its origin and composition to its varied cultural, philosophical and religious backgrounds to help on a development of a creative process in contemporary lighting design. Through *songket* this research scrutinised the rituals and customs which encompass the philosophy and meanings of light from the Malay interpretation and understandings in terms of culture, spirituality, physical attributes and emotion. The first objective is to analyse the philosophy and meaning of light to the Malays, through an in-depth study of the symbols and motifs of *songket*. Secondly, this study has interpreted traditional Malay light application and understanding in contemporary context. From the two objectives mentioned above, the third objectives has been established where concepts of contemporary lighting design can be elaborated based on the findings which related to the theoretical interests derived from the *songket* motifs and transformations into contemporary lighting design practices. The results of this research are qualitative. The research methodology used in this research involved collecting qualitative data. The qualitative approach is used to confirm and corroborate findings within a single study on the interpretation of light in Malay culture and to answer the research questions. There are supported by structured interviews, observation and visual data from various backgrounds. The motifs of *songket* can be seen as the ‘light’ that symbolically represents the Supreme Creator of man, beast and nature. The meaning of light in Malay culture have been understood not only in the scientific and physical senses, but

understood more deeply within the culture. The results have shown that the Malay has translated this appreciation of God's (Allah) beautiful creation into *songket* through the sense of weaver, who then transmitted this message to their mind and heart. This research showed its relationship with the Malay, who created the cultural art and heritage, by adding 'soul' in their design, taking the aspects of culture, belief and divinity, all of which open our minds to existence and relates it with light. By scrutinising the philosophy of the Malay art, this research discovered that light and lighting should not be understood only in the normal sense of being merely a design or physical entities, but it needs to be appreciated and expressed through emotions, mind and physical. The changes that took place remain a heritage, preserved and developed, while adopting new changes and technology that enhance creativity in creative process in contemporary lighting design.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

High in artistic value and full of beauty, Malay heritage artwork can be appreciated directly or indirectly. The distinctly unique motifs of *songket* in Malay textile are characterised by hidden and symbolic elements. Malay *songket* is one of the oldest traditional Malay arts. Terengganu State Museum, is concerned about this Malay heritage and has a complete sources in their permanent exhibition to publicise the beauty, the history and the philosophy behind Malay *songket*. This research describes what lies beneath the *songket* motifs specifically the bamboo shoot motifs leading to the main interest of the meaning and philosophy of light together with traditions, historical associations and it analyses its motifs. In general, the Malay *songket* has a distinct regional style, which owes its origin and composition to its varied cultural and religious backgrounds. Its designs, symbols and ornamental styles are testament to the excellence of a strong Malay sense of belonging. Historically, under the influence of different neighbouring powers such as the Buddhist-oriented Srivijaya Empire in Sumatera and the Hindu-oriented-Majapahit Empire in Jawa had left many cultural and religious imprints on Malay society. This research will therefore deal with the nature of Hindu-Buddhist influence and with the Islamisation of the Malays in *songket* motifs; leading to the lighting philosophies, interpretations and their meanings in Malay culture. The knowledge gained about the *songket*'s motifs has led to an insight on the perception, understandings and meanings of light

amongst the Malays. It is this skill and ability that this research has identified, as it analyses the *songket*'s symbols and motifs as part of the interpretation and transformation process for the contemporary lighting design. The *songket* motifs discussed have numerous associations with the perception towards religion and customs, history, beliefs, human spirituality and the Malay culture identity, which has been identified through extensive study to help on a development of ideas and concepts of light culture. The *songket*'s symbols and motifs must be first be understood, then analysed and thoroughly discussed in this study. The notion of light hidden behind the *songket* motifs and its philosophies behind the bamboo shoot motifs will be discussed and discovered and holds promise for progress in this research. This would pave towards the contemporary lighting design by understandings a traditional Malay philosophy of light but practicing in a contemporary manner.

## **1.2 Background of Research and Framework**

Greater understanding and more extensive research on the Malay interpretations and perceptions of the *songket* motifs and their associations with cultural, spiritual and physical attributes would draw different conclusions about the Malay identity. The research and investigation are focused on the manifestation of the Malay culture subsequently on Malay *songket* motifs. Thus, this research requires a better understanding and interpretation of light from the perception and understandings of Malay culture, including their culture and identity, by understanding these contexts:

- . Rituals and customs related to light in Malay culture.

- . The philosophy and meanings of light in Malay culture, for example the Malay interpretation and understandings of light (e.g. white light for good behavior and vice versa, religious Malay proverbs, such as ‘light symbolizes the ray that influences one’s actions’ and ‘the light of truth’).
- . An understanding of the meaning of light in terms of:
  - a. culture
  - b. spirituality
  - c. physical attributes
- . The broader areas of this research are:
  - a. culture
  - b. spirituality
  - c. physical attributes
  - d. emotions related to light,

Above all tangible and intangible variables stated above, light can influence these attributes as well as the display of cultural products that are rich in these attributes. In addition to this, by studying the Malay culture that are on how the Malay people perceive the elements of light and their understandings of light through the in-depth study of *songket* motifs as a tool would be useful for the development of the concepts.

This research again focused on a cultural product that is the Malay *songket* as a tool to pave deeper understanding of the Malay culture and identity and a trigger to understand the meaning of light and its interpretation among Malays. It is significant to note that *songket* is the most appropriate context for discussing the sense of belonging and the localised identity. Furthermore, *songket* presents the

identity of Malaysia, based on the purity of the Malay race, which evolved as it received external influences, such as Hindu-Buddhism, Islam and the West (Bahauddin, 2003).

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

It is true that up till now many studies have been conducted on *songket* motifs, whether from the aspect of design arrangement or in the expression of the philosophy of the Malay culture. However, many of the previous studies were focused on the development of weaving in the state of Terengganu, where it has become a part of the state identity and the local culture. The history of its development and the importance of handicraft products such as the *songket* in Terengganu have been discussed in Chapter 2. The activities of *songket* production in Terengganu have provided the evidence that *songket* weavers of the olden days greatly understood the meaning and the philosophy contained in every motif. The motifs design put forward were not purely from aesthetic perspective only. In fact, the philosophy behind the design is also to remind weavers about the meaning of life. In addition, it also reminds the user to appreciate the ethical values in the Malay culture itself. This aspect has also been discussed in Chapter 2.

Researchers on *songket* such as Siti Zainon Ismail, G. Sevanagam, Norwani Norwawi and Haziyah Husin have successfully deepened their studies on the motifs of *songket* from the aspect of the needs of the Malay society, especially those related to ceremonial activities and the variety of their design. In addition, the long history of *songket* in Terengganu that has been discussed in Chapter 2 has produced



various kinds of flora and fauna motifs, which contain their own meanings and philosophy. The flora and fauna motifs have been designed using geometrical variations that are highly symbolic and full of symbols that reflect the basic values, beliefs, and local culture.

However, studies on the aspect of interpretation of light from the view of Malay cultural philosophy has not been discussed from the production of *songket* motifs and has not yet been focused in any academic studies. The question is: How is the existence of “light” behind the motifs of the *songket*? “Light” in this study does not mean the light that can be seen using the naked eyes only, but it includes the deeper meaning of light that focuses on the true values in the life, the divinity, the harmony, the strength, the love, the vigour, and the responsibility of the Malay society. These values have been studied by previous researchers. However, these studies did not involve the philosophy of “light” which is seen as the key to all these aspects. This is the gap which will be filled by this study.

Therefore, this study focuses on the interpretation and the philosophy of light in the Malay culture to enrich the cultural manifestations, which are still at a low level. In short, this study sees that the *songket* motif contains many implicit meanings, such that the more it is studied the more will be the issues that need to be revealed and brought to the knowledge of the Malay society. This has been proven in Chapter 4.

In carrying out this study, the researcher identified several problem statements. The variables that have been interpreted in *songket* and its motifs can be referred to other Malay art. However, the absence of a detailed study on the philosophy and meaning of light among the Malays in Malay culture has led to

difficulty in collecting accurate and relevant study material. Nevertheless, several Malaysian scholars had studied the motifs of *songket* and related Malay textiles, and had done so from different perspectives to meet the different objectives of their respective studies and areas of interest.

Besides *songket*, the researcher has identified the lighting interpretation in Malay culture as written in a few Malay texts that described in many ways in Syair Sultan Maulana, Selindung Kedah Tua and Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa. Although the elements of light extracted from those old Malay texts are merely transcriptions or documentations, they are in fact manifestations of oral traditions that always points towards many aspects of life. The tangible and intangible elements in Malay old text are the inspiration subjects that can be applied in this research to further examination and exploration of the meaning of light in Malay culture.

Among the researchers that have studied the *songket* motifs is Azizi Bahauddin, who studied the bamboo shoot motif and other motifs in *songket* for the exhibition on *songket* applications and interior design elements. He had focused his study on human senses, the combination between Fine Art and Architectural Spaces. He also recognised motifs of *songket* that have a Malay identity, which would help find the meaning and philosophy of light studied here. Norwani Mohd. Nawawi is another scholar who continued the study on Malay textiles, specifically the 'ikat Limar', which is closely related to *songket*. Limar textile or "Kain Limar" was worn by the Malay royalty, who were also influenced by the arrival of Hindu-Buddhism in the Malay Archipelago. She also wrote a book on the Malaysian *songket*, which was instrumental in helping the researcher analyse and understand the symbols and motifs of *songket*. Mohd Najib Ahmad Dawa, the former Director of National Art Galeri of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a fine artist and expert on Malay

batik who is intimately involved with *songket*, also helped the researcher with this study. Another philosopher of *songket* motifs, Mr. Wan Yahya who worked on the bamboo shoot motifs in Malay culture, is one of the famous researchers in Malaysia. His research on bamboo shoot motifs has been presented abroad. Mr. Wan Yahya expertises in bamboo shoot symbolism and its philosophy in Malay culture gives full encouragement towards the findings on the lighting philosophy, meanings and its beliefs of the Malays.

These studies had indirectly resulted in the more in-depth questions stated above. The above mentioned earlier studies of scholars inspired and motivated the researcher to scrutinise the meaning and philosophy of light among the Malays of Malaysia through a detailed study on the motifs of *songket*. This study is most important in increasing the manifestation of the cultural history of the Malays besides showcasing the Malay culture to the world.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

Like any study, the research objectives and research questions needed to be prioritised. After making reference to and reading up on the works of previous researchers on the symbols and motifs of *songket*, researcher attempted to raise several issues and scenarios on the study to find the answers hidden behind the Malay art. As clarified earlier by the researcher, the motifs of *songket* contain hidden meanings that must be examined in detail and analysed critically to find answers on the Malay identity. Next comes the questions of what motifs in *songket* was in the sense of its meaning? Leading to this, the researcher's task in this study is to find the answer to the main question, which are, "How the Malays define and

interpret the element of light”. What is the meaning of light and its philosophy in Malay culture which can be extracted through a detailed study on the symbols and motifs of *songket*? “How can the light today be seen and judged from the theoretical interest of this research?” And “How would the findings of this study help in developing a contemporary lighting design concepts and transformation?” These symbols and motifs must be studied to answer the study questions, which would, in turn, reinforce this study. The research also raises further questions about how to identify and interpret the tangible and intangible elements in *songket* motif in order to pave the research of the light and lighting design. However, this research will probably not provide 'right answers', but it may throw valuable questions, startling links, fresh light on relationships, new angles on hitherto unquestioningly held views.

## **1.5 Research Objectives**

Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

- i. To analyse the philosophy and meanings of light in the context of the Malays, through an in-depth study of the symbols and motifs of *songket*.
- ii. To interpret traditional Malay light application and understanding in contemporary lighting design context.
- iii. To establish the concepts of contemporary lighting design based on the findings which related to the theoretical interests derived from the *songket* motifs and their transformations into lighting design practices.

Therefore, this research will put clearer the identity of Malay philosophy of light as part of the culture into the international level as a result of the investigation that understands the historical background of *songket* motifs, religion, customs and beliefs. With time, the researcher hopes to develop an interpretation from the theoretical interests towards the development of ideas into the lighting design transformations and appearances resulting from the analysis. It is hoped that the findings of this study will also help implement and improve the future of development of ideas of the contemporary lighting design. Thus, to serve as a manifestation of the Malay identity and a reference for practising curators, architects, interior designers and exhibition designers. Only then can those parties embark upon a process of application, that is to say develop a concept for the exhibition that is both aesthetic and in line with the initial idea, and which will leave a clear stamp of light and culture of the Malays.

## **1.6 Expected Outcomes**

The researcher will give a detailed description of the Malay interpretation and meanings of light and lighting and the philosophy related to theoretical interests. Colour illustrations and photographs will be presented as visual evidence for the dissertation.

Symbols found in the motifs of *songket* will be interpreted and analysed critically to meet the objectives of this study. However, the issues of the Malay identity, interpretations, the meaning and philosophy of light, and its historical background are still hidden behind the symbols and motifs of *songket*. The analysis of the symbols and motifs of *songket* to learn the philosophy and meaning of light

would realise the potential of these findings in expanding the concept of the architecture and light, especially in its focus on the transformations into contemporary lighting design. Moreover, it is hoped that the findings of this study will further enrich the manifestations of the Malay culture whilst instilling awareness and appreciation of the history of the symbols and motifs of *songket* among future generations of Malaysia. The researcher hopes that the knowledge of these and its sources would also lend quality to the *songket* exhibition, in that it would positively enrich the historical documentation in *songket* galleries.

In relation to this, the findings will also widen the scope of global appreciation on Malay history and art, especially to the western world, and will convey a clear message of the interpretations of lighting by using a Malay philosophy.

## **1.7 Definition of Terms**

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According to Ismail (1986), *songket* has been classified as a traditional handicraft which has been in existence, hand-in-hand with the traditional Malay life itself. In the context of this study, Terengganu has been identified as important because according to Wan Hashim Wan Teh (as cited in Hussin, 2006) it is among the states in Peninsular Malaysia, which still maintains the characteristics of the traditional culture and customs that have existed hundreds of years ago (Hussin, 2006). Ismail further said that the traditional arts has expanded and has been a continuation of the early history and beliefs of the Malay society, which is still practised in the ensuing periods.

This study has chosen the Malay culture as the parameter, while *songket* and its motifs are utilised as a “tool” to elaborate on the implicit and explicit Malay cultural philosophy. According to Ismail (1986), culture is a system of symbols which enables the Malay society to represent and relate its experience through harmony of design in the arrangements of the motifs on the *songket* (Zain, 1983). This study begins with the analysis of the cultural philosophy of the Malay society behind the existence of the motifs found on the *songket*. Then, the study will focus on the more meaningful motifs in traditional handicrafts of the Malay society, namely the bamboo shoot motif, which has also been identified as among the important motifs used for designing the head (*kepala*) of the *songket* (Hussin, 2005). As Hussin (2005) and Ismail (1986) mentioned, the process of creating the individual motif by the designer can reflect the idea and feelings of the creator, as the designer takes into consideration the environment, time, situation, and his or her own experience.

From the interpretation point of view, the beauty of the bamboo shoot motif focuses on the belief, understanding, and religion in the Malay society. According to Ismail (1986), such a condition is determined based on the analysis on the style of a creation and *songket* is categorised under this aspect. This study also has identified that *songket* in general has the motifs that are rich in philosophical elements and symbolic meaning, and its contents are the closest medium in the Malay society. Meanwhile, the bamboo shoot motif is rich with the life philosophy of the Malay society, which reflects the local cultural values and norms of the society.

From the micro aspect, the philosophical aspect and interpretation of light in the bamboo shoot motif in the Malay culture can be expressed not only through the physical aspect alone. In fact, research has been done in the context of religion and piety towards Allah, the harmonious life of the Malay society and kinship. The hidden interpretation and philosophy of light can be expressed through detailed study of *songket* as a “tool” for deepening knowledge on Malay culture. The contents of the philosophy have been discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

## **1.8 Thesis Organisation**

This thesis consists of five chapters organized as follows:

**Chapter 1** introduces the parameter and the variables that will be highlighted in this research on the Malay interpretations and perceptions in the Malay art and their associations with cultural, spiritual and physical attributes. This chapter also delineates problem statement, research questions, research objectives, definition of terms and expected outcomes.

**Chapter 2** reviews the literature relating to Malay art such as in Malay text and *songket* motifs. The research and investigation are focused on the manifestation of the Malay old text and *songket* motifs by establishing the understanding and interpretation of light from the perception and understanding of Malay culture. The researcher will scrutinise in detail the above mentioned variables for a better understanding of light which will be related to the rituals and customs, spirituals, physical attributes and emotions.



**Chapter 3** delineates the research methodology, including research design, synthesis of research frame work, data collection techniques such as structured interviews, questionnaires and visual data. Structured questionnaires were prepared for the experts in the field of *songket* motifs, Malay historians, scholars and lighting designers. Qualitative data were collected, each with its own merit in strengthening the study.

**Chapter 4** explains and discusses the important aspects, such as notes from meetings and interviews to support the scenarios, which are further supported by visual evidence. Results of the discussion and analysis will be analysed in detail.

**Chapter 5** presents the conclusions and recommendations from the research findings, theoretical and practical implication, limitations and strength for future research. Overall, the researcher has discovered the relationship between light and Malay culture through the synthesis and an understanding that are supported by facts.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to explain how historical factors can account for the patterns of characteristics exhibited by the different elements in Malay *songket* motifs such as flora and fauna, food, society and royalty. *Songket* and its motif as mentioned in Chapter 1 is part of the Malay art that contains hidden meanings and rich with Malay cultural philosophies, historical associations and traditions. Thus, this chapter explores further the previous research related to *songket* and its motifs to establish what needs to be researched. Further to this, the researcher will scrutinize the historical background of *songket* and will look into the Malay Archipelago and the Southeast Asian region as a whole, for the historical and socio-cultural backgrounds of Peninsular Malaysia cannot be studied independently, and they are generally linked to the Malay Archipelago and Southern Asia. This chapter will therefore deal with the nature of animist, Hindu-Buddhist influence and with the Islamisation of the Malays in *songket* motifs. The motifs discussed have numerous associations with the understandings towards religion, beliefs and the Malay culture, which can only be identified through extensive study. These motifs are often used by the Malays either in *songket* designs because of its significance according to Malay beliefs and its historical value among the local community. Hence, although the researcher was unable to find the absolute answer, by understanding and studying the relationship between the elements discussed in this section, the significance of light and the philosophy behind it may be understood in

the symbolic and indirect sense. This will pave the way for more extensive studies of lighting design in the future. Mackenzie (1926), who viewed symbols as an imported element of culture represented by a particular symbol, that often blended with the elements of a local religious system, with the result that the symbol is found to have acquired a wider or more complex significance than it possessed in the area of origin. According to him, it is important when dealing with ancient religious and magico-religious ideas to search for clues in surviving or recorded beliefs and customs (Mackenzie, 1926). In the same chapter, Mackenzie made several statements and gave examples on how motifs and symbols evolved into beliefs of a community, and these are most informative and beneficial to this study.

## 2.2 The Malays in East Peninsular Malaysia



Map 2.1: Terengganu State Map  
Source (Hashim, 1999)

Terengganu (Map: 2.1) is a state in Malaysia located on the east coast of the Peninsula. Facing the South China Sea and the Pacific region, its geographical location exposes it to external influence, either introduced by foreign traders who graced its shores or by the local traders themselves. Naturally, due to its coastal location, its culture is largely characterised by the sea, its people seafarers in spirit and nature. They build their homes along beaches and by riversides, and turns to the sea for livelihood. They are industrious fishermen, skilful sailors, and dextrous shipbuilders.

While absorbing foreign influence, they had also preserved their own culture. And even before the influx of external influences such as Hinduism, Islam and the West, the Malays already had knowledge in science and technology (Ismail, 1999). Captain Alexander Hamilton, a well-known British trader who arrived in Terengganu in 1719-1720, said:

“Trangganu stands pleasantly near the sea, on the side of a river that has a shallow bar, and many rocks scattered to and again within the river... The town is above half-peopled with Chinese who had a good trade for three or four junks yearly, besides some that trade to Siam, Cambodia, Tunqueen and Sambas”.

(Ismail, 1999)

The trade convergence and relations influenced the culture of the local community, who were largely fishermen, into one of trade, as observed by a writer:

“The original Malay population, which consisted largely of fisherman, had become mixed with a great many foreign elements... . Besides seamen, there were the actual traders, merchants in a large way of business who had undertaken the journey with considerable capital or valuable cargo.”

(Ismail, 1999)

The womenfolk of Terengganu were recognised for their expertise in weaving. The handicraft of Terengganu attained commendable levels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earned the praises of Westerners. Hugh Clifford, for example, considered Kuala Terengganu as “The Birmingham of the Peninsula” (Hill, 1949). Furthermore, he also remarked, “*The natives are more ingenious than the Malays of any other part of the Peninsula*” (Hill, 1949). Hugh Clifford placed greatest value on the gold-inlaid cloth, silk and the *perang rosak* cloth. These fabrics were sold very dearly in the Malay Peninsula. Hill regarded the cloth that was the best and of the highest quality to be as follows:

“The finest types of finished cloths all belong to a class known generically as kain *songket* in which gold and silver thread...”

(Hill, 1949)

In those traditional days, Terengganu was known as a state with advanced development in religious knowledge (Azmi, 1987). Azmi (1987) stated that the onset of this intellectual tradition was somewhat related to the advent of Islam and spread through the state by Arab traders. Literacy then is evident in the *Batu Bersurat* of Terengganu, a stone inscribed with writing. According to Yatim, a Professor of Islamic Art at Academy of Malay Studies that the contents of this inscription are the greatest historical significance for the coming of Islam to Malaysia (Yatim, 2005). He stated that it is the oldest Jawi inscription yet found in this country, but it also proves that an Islamic principality existed in Terengganu almost 100 years before Melaka (Malacca) foundation (Yatim, 2005).

The Malay Peninsula is situated halfway along the trade route between India and the Malay and Chinese archipelagos. Thanks to its strategic location, the Malay

States became a transit point for the Hindus, where water and firewood supplies were replenished, and a shelter point against storms. According to Omar, the Hindus first arrived in the Malay States between the first and fifth centuries A.D., based on the discovery of the Palawa-Hinayana character in (the state of) Kedah and sculptures of Buddha displaying the artwork styles as clothing art and weaving such as Amerawati (a cloth art characterised by layers) and Gupta (an art of seamless cloth weaving) in the town of Kinta, in the state of Perak, both estimated to date back to that period (Omar, 1999).

The Malays in those days were also known to trade from island to island, reaching as far as India and China (Omar, 1999). Wherever there was a place to take shelter against the stormy weathers, it would become a port and city of trade. Some examples of such places in the Malay States is Terengganu (Omar, 1999). Ptolemy noted in his map that since Year 2 A.D., the Malay Peninsula had ports that were visited by ships making return journeys between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea; sailors referred to it as the “Golden Khersones” or the “Golden Peninsula” (Azmi, 1987).

According to Azmi (1987) cultural diffusion also led to the blending of various materials from India, Persian-Arab and China. This development introduced new textiles in the coastal regions of the Malay kingdom since the time Sriwijaya ruled Palembang-Jambi, Minangkabau, Patani-Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. Terengganu became an economic and cultural port as far back as those early A.D. years (Ismail, 1999). The combination of Hindu-Buddhist influence (Sriwijaya) and Chinese elements, the arrival of Islam, plus the entrance of traders from the entire Malay Archipelago, jointly fortified its role as the cultural centre for textiles (Ismail, 1999). Trade boats of different nationalities commuting between the Malay

Archipelago, Champa and China would transit at the ports along Terengganu, such as Port Foloan which is now known as Kuala Berang in Terengganu States (Azmi, 1987). Port Foloan was also a famous religious centre for Buddhism and renowned for its business forte under the rule of Sriwijaya (670 A.D. – 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D) (Azmi, 1987).

From the foreign influences, we can see later in section 2.6 that the Malays which can be categorised as heterogeneous tradition, willing to accept and to adopt foreign cultures, though the acceptance in a way can be in syncretism with local cultures (Wan Yusof, 1983). As such, the process of cultural evolution and diffusion saw not only the industry of woven textiles attaining such tremendous development that it projected the characteristics and identity of the Malay World but also given new interpretation of the *songket* motifs that are rich in intrinsic meanings in Malay society (Ismail, 1994).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, besides *songket*, the researcher has identified the lighting interpretation in Malay culture as written in a few Malay old literatures that described in many ways in Syair Sultan Maulana, Selindung Kedah Tua and Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa. Although the elements of light extracted from those old Malay texts are merely transcriptions or documentations, they are in fact manifestations of oral traditions that always points towards many aspects of life. The tangible and intangible elements in Malay old text are the inspiration subjects that can be applied in this research to further examination and exploration of the meaning of light in Malay culture. Those elements will be discussed in section 2.3.

### **2.3 The Malay Culture Interpretation of Light Based on the Malay Text**

In this section, old Malay text was used to understand the definition of light based on the cultural structure of the Malay people before and after the advent of foreign cultures. It is important to obtain the meaning and interpretation of light by studying their societal elements without the adoption and influence of other cultures. In some of the old Malay text, several other terms were found to be related to light. This will be elaborated on in a following write-up. The researcher evaluated these historical literary works to be used as a resource for explaining the definition of light within the Malay culture.

This section focuses on understanding light in old Malay literature, divided into two basic purposes. The first will produce a write-up that examines the terminology and the application of light in old Malay literature, taken from a collection of classical poetry and folklore. The second uses that write-up to highlight facts about the usage of the word *light* in the lives of the Malay community in the olden days, leading to the study objective.

Although the elements of light extracted from those old Malay texts are merely transcriptions or documentations, they are in fact manifestations of oral traditions that mainly revolved around the palace and the elite class. According to Salleh (1998), written tales of traditional Malay history all describe the community's lifestyle and mind-set that reflect. *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, for example, conveys values through the history of their king and their belief in myths (Salleh, 1998). He furthers that the myths and legends largely originate from Hindu customs, while the rest are from Islamic civilizations that are no longer referred to



as myths, but rather as actual events (Salleh, 1998). Therefore, the study of light from Malay text extractions is regarded as a key resource in establishing an identity surrounding light in the Malay community, thereby helping the researcher to achieve the study objective.

The initial statement above can be supported by an excerpt from *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* that relates the worship of idols associated with the sun (*matahari*), as follows:

*...demikian lagi seperti iktikad yang tiada berbetulan itu seperti orang tua yang dahulu kalanya yang menyembah berhala yang diperbuat yang boleh berkata-kata atau tiada dapat berkata-kata seperti pohon kayu yang disembahnya dan seperti **matahari** yang disembahnya.*

(Salleh, 1998)

When Islam was being spread to Aceh by Syekh Abdullah during the times of Hinduism, the word *light* was also used but was given some characteristics, such as “brilliant”, which implies emotional strength and confidence. For example:

*Maka perjalanan yang sebulan itu pun menjadi sesaat jua perginya. Jikalau **malam kelam pada mata segala manusia maka cerah terang kepadanya.***

(Salleh, 1998)

Based on the literature review, the old Malay texts were divided into two major contents. The first is on the life of the Malay people, adapted from components of nature, such as sunlight, moonlight, the position of the sun, fire and its related episodes as explained by Salleh in his writings of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. The importance of the king and the palace is so great to the Malay

community that the four elements of light were used extensively in their daily lives or in momentous situations and on auspicious occasions.

For instance, the tale relates the origins of the early rulers of Kedah to myths about princes and princesses found in clusters of bamboo or that drifted inside river froth (Salleh, 1998). Princess Junjung Buih, found inside a mass of bubbles on the Banjar River, was married to Raden Suryanata, the queen of Majapahit's prince, who came from the sun. They represent the forces of the cosmos, namely water, fire and the sun, who united to become the ancestors of the Banjar kings (Salleh, 1998).

In the story of *Selindung Bulan Kedah Tua*, Salleh stated that the royal family also used the cosmic element of sun through the word dawn (*fajar menyinsing*) to describe the morning by giving it characteristics of rising sun as *flaming red*. It is, in fact, widely used in the text, as follows:

*Tersebut al-kesah ayah Pangkulun Duli baginda. Pada suatu hari baginda beradu di-anjong istana. Pada pagi itu:*

*ayam pun berkokok  
murai pun membacha  
**fajar menyinsing,  
merah menyala***

(Salleh,1964)

Cosmic elements were also used in the poetry entitled, *Syair Sultan Maulana*, in determining the time to start the journey (*menanti keluar matahari*) during the war at Salang Island, as follows:

*Kedalam selat membawak diri  
tiadalah is keluar mari  
Melayu sekalian berkemas diri  
**menanti keluar matahari***

(Hashim, 1980)

Other examples extracted from *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* that are related to nature include the position of the sun in ascertaining the location, position (*matahari hidup*) and direction of journey (*sebelah matahari naik*), as follows:

*...Maka pada hari itu juga datang langgar Raja Pekerma Dewa dengan angkatan yang amat besar juga, sebelah selatan kotanya. Itu pun demikian jual katanya, setengah kata orang datang meramaikan segala permainan rajanya. Maka datang pula suatu angkatan lagi, Raja Usul Alam namanya. Itupun besar jua angkatanannya, diperbuat kota disebelah **matahari hidup**.*

(Salleh, 1998)

*...Maka sembah Agam Jiwa Masyteri dan menteri Ambelan Masyteri, keduanya pun naik kuda berlari-lari keluar dari **sebelah pintu matahari naik lepas** keluar suruh katup semula pintu itu.*

(Salleh, 1998)

*...Sekonyong-konyong Raja Kamisyur melarikan anak isterinya keluar kota **sebelah matahari naik**, lalu is menuju masuk ke dalam hutan rimba belantara.*

(Salleh, 1998)

*...Raja Phra Ong Mahaputisat pun menyuruh lagi orang pergi mencari tanah bumi **sebelah matahari hidup** antara barat laut yang dapat diperbuat kota istana buat negeri anakanda baginda Raja Phra Ong Mahawangsa.*

(Salleh, 1998)

The *Hikayat* also used colours, such as the red in fire (*merah seperti api*), to describe the weapons used by King Merong Mahawangsa regarding the behaviour of Vishnu's eagle, as follows:

*Demi dilihat oleh Raja Merong Mahawangsa hal  
kelakuan burung geroda itu kesaktian menurunkan  
hujan, angina rebut guruh petir itu, maka segeralah ia  
mengambil anak panah yang bernama Ayun-ayunan  
bicara menahankan angina rebut burung geroda itu,  
hujungnya **merah seperti api**.*

(Salleh, 1998)

*...jikalau burung geroda diatas burung jentayu  
memagut-magut, serta keluar dari mulutnya  
**api menyala-nyala**.*

(Salleh, 1998)

Secondly, in the old Malay text, the people of the palace used the *light* in more detail to explain and expand the word within their everyday life or to describe a royal coronation, as follows:

*Kita naikkan anak kita yang perempuan, serta  
menghimpunkan rakyat, bala tentera dan tuan hamba  
keempat mengiringkan bersama-sama anak kita ke  
**sebelah matahari hidup** kita ini, hendaklah dirajakan.*

(Salleh, 1998)

In addition, these Malay stories from the past reveal a local culture based on the interpretation and expression of a more symbolic meaning. Elements of light were seen as a strong influence in their lifestyles back then. This is evident in *Syair Sultan Maulana* that centres upon the history and life of the traditional Malay folk, as examined by Hashim (1980). The poetry used various words for *light* through a most symbolic interpretation. The researcher finds this to be a complete and detailed text on light and its interpretation. Interestingly, it uses colours to illustrate the battle at Salang Island. The colour red signifies the power of the weapons in intimidating the enemy.